

BRIDGING THE BAY OF BENGAL: TOWARD A STRONGER BIMSTEC

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The Bay of Bengal is one of the world's least integrated regions, with abysmal levels of trade, connectivity, and cooperation. The deep divide between India and other countries around the bay hinders their efforts to increase their economic and strategic interdependence.

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), a regional multilateral organization founded in 1997, offers a well-positioned platform to help address these challenges. But BIMSTEC's mission to deepen regionalism will stand a better chance of succeeding if its members (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand) make the organization a priority, endow it with adequate resources, and enact reforms to strength its capabilities.

New Momentum for Multilateralism

As BIMSTEC marks its twentieth anniversary, a confluence of factors has created an opportunity for the organization to help make the bay region more integrated.

- In a more interdependent world, states around the Bay of Bengal are realizing that their national economic and security interests are increasingly tied to the ability to cooperate across borders through regional institutions.
- Responding to the inroads China has made in the region, India is placing an unprecedented emphasis on strengthening regional connectivity and links with Southeast Asia.
- Small BIMSTEC countries see regional multilateralism as a potential check on the rising capabilities of China, India, and major external powers.

Strengthening BIMSTEC to Advance Regional Integration

India and other BIMSTEC member states should:

- Instill in the organization a normative vision for a cooperative, multilateral regional order that is based on existing rules and principles of liberalism, not on unilateralism.
- Empower the BIMSTEC secretariat with greater human and financial resources to proactively drive the organization's agenda. The organization and its staff cannot do so unless members agree to grant greater autonomy and delegate responsibilities.
- Continue to prioritize sustained physical connectivity and high-quality infrastructure, so as to help facilitate greater regional flows of goods, services, and people. Particular attention must be paid to multi-modal projects that link coastal ports to the hinterland, including landlocked Bhutan, northeastern India, and Nepal.
- Expand India's role as an informal leader. New Delhi must back up its words by bolstering its investment in the organization without affecting the interests of other members.
- Open BIMSTEC to cooperation with extraregional powers committed to inclusive regionalism, including Australia, the European Union, Japan, and the United States, as well as multilateral institutions like the Asian Development Bank.

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